Culture, Vytautas Kavolis reminds us, is not randomly and evenly distributed. Historically, "in each nation or international civilization, periods of increasing or declining creativity ... may be identified." There have been golden ages in the history of culture, and there have been dark ages, eras of cultural renewal and eras of cultural stagnation.

Jewish cultural life in Philadelphia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries falls somewhere between these two extremes. It does not compare to Viennese culture during the same period, but one can, nevertheless, identify a period of extraordinary cultural ferment and institutional reorganization within the community that had considerable implications for Jewish cultural life throughout the United States. To borrow a phrase from Frederic Morton, the Jewish cultural leaders of Philadelphia, members of the Philadelphia Group, were men who created "not industries, but climates; men who brewed the very weather of our minds today." Working in their home city or in neighboring cities (New York, Baltimore, Washington, D.C.), sometimes laboring alone and sometimes in conjunction with non-Philadelphians, they created the basic institutions, characteristics, and standards of twentieth-century American Jewish cultural life reaching almost to contemporary times.

Philadelphia's role in American Jewish cultural life dates far back into the nineteenth century. Individuals like Isaac Leeser and Rebecca Gratz, along with institutions like the Hebrew Sunday School Society, the first Jewish Publication Society, and the Hebrew Education Society, amply illustrate the community's early commitment to Jewish education, at least of a rudimentary sort. According to Bertram W. Korn, during this period Philadelphia served as "the ideal experimental center
of American Jewish creativity.”3 The Jewish community was, to a sur-
prising degree, involved in reading, writing, and learning.

Philadelphia as a whole is not generally known as a center of cul-
ture. “Proper Philadelphians,” according to E. Digby Baltzell, “have
made almost no serious contributions to the history of the American
mind.” While Boston Brahmins were “a reading and writing people,”
their opposite numbers in Philadelphia, according to Baltzell, “were
neither”—at least not in any comparable way. Indeed, John Lukacs
describes the city as “almost indifferent to intellectual achievement.”
This may explain why local Jews came to fill this void, for in the
absence of an entrenched Protestant cultural elite, they had the oppor-
tunity to rise and gain recognition. Over time, culture became one
more vehicle for distinguishing Philadelphia Jews from their non-
Jewish counterparts.

Yet for a brief period following the death of Isaac Leeser, in 1868,
the cultural level of Philadelphia’s Jewish community sharply de-
clined. Leeser’s periodical, the Occident, was maintained for a year
by Mayer Sulzberger and then ended; thereafter, the city was without
a local Jewish newspaper for six years. Maimonides College, founded
in 1867 to train American rabbis and to wage what Leeser called “the
great fight against ignorance,” lost its last students and disappeared
at the end of 1872 or the beginning of 1873.5 The Hebrew Education
Society’s parochial school similarly declined, and then watched as
many of its pupils, including young Cyrus Adler, moved over to the
city’s improved public schools. In 1878, the society was forced to
close its school altogether and to focus exclusively on supplementary
Hebrew education of a more elementary kind.6

The only bright spot in this otherwise bleak picture was the forma-
tion of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association in 1875. This was the
work of a younger generation of Philadelphia Jews: the first president
was Mayer Sulzberger, age thirty-one; the president of the junior
branch (ages 16–21) was Solomon Solis-Cohen, age eighteen. The
new organization sought “to promote a higher culture among the
young men, and to unite them in a liberal organization which shall
tend to their moral, intellectual, and social improvement.” Working
closely with the New York YMHA, founded slightly earlier, the orga-
nization underscored the importance of Jewish cultural activities: it
established lectures, literary discussions, and formal classes, opened
up free Jewish libraries, and even laid plans to issue a series of Jewish
books. One of the organization’s most notable achievements, in the
late 1870s, was the “Grand Revival of the Jewish National Holiday
of Chanukka,” complete with appropriate pageants and publicity.
This was an effort to “rescue this national festival from the oblivion
into which it seemed rapidly falling" and, presumably, to counteract the evident allure of Christmas. The triumphant success of the 1879 celebration overwhelmed even the organizers. "Every worker in the cause of a revived Judaism," one of them wrote, "must have felt the inspiration exuded from the enthusiastic interest evinced by such a mass of Israel's people."

The reference here to "the cause of a revised Judaism" is the key, I think, to what transpired during the ensuing decades, a period of dramatic cultural awakening. In the late 1870s, a group of young people in Philadelphia and New York, the Philadelphians being particularly influential, came to believe, with all the audacity, enthusiasm, and fervor of their youth, that they, through their own efforts, could spark an American Jewish cultural revolution. Max Cohen, one of the New Yorkers in this group and later librarian of New York's Maimonides Library, wrote an impassioned letter on this subject to Solomon Solis-Cohen in Philadelphia in which he declared that "the great question for contemporary Judaism is whether it will continue God's work or cease to be." His own conclusion was unambiguous: "Israel must ever be whatever its children make it... They who wish to give Israel her true position in the world's autonomy must set a high ideal before them and abide thereby." (Incidentally, Cohen, when he wrote this lofty letter, was all of twenty-six, and the last line of his letter reads "mother is calling that it is time to blow out my lamp.")

The "high ideal" that these young people set for themselves, talked about, and worked toward was Jewish religious and cultural renewal. In the American Hebrew, the influential New York Jewish newspaper that they founded in 1879 (with Solomon Solis-Cohen and former Philadelphian Cyrus Sulzberger on the editorial board, later joined by Cyrus Adler), they spoke of "untiring endeavors to stir up our brethren to pride in our time-honored faith, to incite them by all the means in our power to shed lustre on our ancestral fame." Privately, they used phrases like "the perpetuation and elevation of Judaism." Several had bound themselves to a solemn covenant "for God and Judaism" which they called K'Yam Dishmaya, pledging to do all in their power to bring Jews back "to the ancient faith." In their opening American Hebrew editorial, they even expressed the triumphalistic hope that in the future America would be the field where the "daughter-religions" would make their way back to Judaism, "and a purified Judaism extend the maternal greeting of love and forgetfulness of ill, to the disintegrating sects of Christendom."10

What is fascinating is that many of those connected as young adults with the YMHA and the American Hebrew, particularly Philadelphians like Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler, and Solomon Solis-Cohen, maintained their heady enthusiasm, and continued throughout their lives to labor on behalf of these self-same goals. In the space of a few decades they helped to establish a whole series of new Jewish cultural institutions in Philadelphia and New York: notably, the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), Jewish Publication Society (1888), American Jewish Historical Society (1892), Gratz College (1893), Jewish Chautauqua Society (1893), and Dropsie College (1907). They were associated with the Jewish Encyclopedia (1901-1906), the movement to bring Solomon Schechter to America (he arrived in 1902), the transfer to America's shores of the Jewish Quarterly Review (1910), and the establishment of American Jewry's first high-quality Hebrew Press (1921). They were also involved in the Jewish Bible translation project (1893-1917) and the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics (1914-1936), both specially funded projects of the Jewish Publication Society.

These highly ambitious and for the most part successful undertakings were all geared to different audiences: some to scholars, some to rabbis and teachers, and some to the Jewish community at large and to non-Jews. In the case of Cyrus Adler, Naomi W. Cohen describes this multitiered cultural agenda as a conscious creation: On one level, Adler envisioned the modern training of Jewish scholars, abetted by appropriate library and publication resources. On a second, he aimed for the education of American rabbis and teachers who would inculcate a loyalty to historical Judaism in consonance with acculturation to American surroundings. On a third, he worked for a community knowledgeable about its heritage, that would appreciate the value of reading books of Jewish interest, of collecting Jewish artifacts, and of keeping alert to contemporary events that involved Jewry.11

What these levels all had in common was the fact that they were dedicated to the same general ends. All sought to promote religious renewal, improved Jewish education, cultural revitalization, the professionalization of Jewish scholarship, the promotion of a positive Jewish image to the Gentiles, and the elevation of American Jewry to a position of greater prominence, if not preeminence among the Jews of the world.

Admittedly, the challenge posed by massive East European Jewish immigration led, for a time, to a greater rhetorical emphasis upon Americanization as a goal, but this should not be exaggerated. Promoters of Jewish culture understood better than other Jewish leaders that the real concern was not so much how to assimilate the East Europeans, as how to ensure that all American Jews would not
assimilate completely. It was this critical insight coupled with a pre-
scient sense that American Jewry needed to prepare itself to play a
central role in the affairs of world Jewry that prompted Philadelphia
Jews to participate in the creation of these great institutions and proj-
ects that shaped American Jewish cultural life into the late twen-
tieth century. 12

Two characteristics of this turn-of-the-century cultural “revolu-
tion” are particularly important, for they serve to distinguish the
cultural activities of the Philadelphia Group and their allies from the
earlier work of what might be termed the Cincinnati Group: Isaac
Mayer Wise, Max Lilienthal, and their associates. These characteris-
tics, with some exaggeration, may be summed up in two negatives:
the Philadelphians were not Reform, and they were not rabbis.

Broadly speaking, the Cincinnatians, led by Isaac Mayer Wise, be-
lieved that some variety of Reform Judaism would inevitably become
Minhag Amerika, the universal custom of American Jews. As a result,
the pathbreaking cultural activities that they undertook—the Ameri-
can Israelite, the establishment of Hebrew Union College, the books
published by Bloch Publishing Company, the short-lived Hebrew Re-
view, and others, all reflected the Reform Jewish perspective. The
Cincinnatians may have believed that they were promoting the “union
of all Israel,” but in fact, and not necessarily consciously, they were
advocating union on their own terms: terms that most members of
the Philadelphia Group could not abide. 13

By contrast, the Philadelphians—at least those caught up in the
spirit of religious revival described earlier—saw Reform as part of the
problem, not part of the solution. They were, as one of their numbers
recalled years later, “young American Jews who, although not inor-
dinately addicted to Orthodoxy as a rigid standardization of thought and
conduct, were yet opposed to the wholesale and reckless discarding of
everything that was Jewish simply because it was inconvenient, orient-
al, or was not in conformity with Episcopalian customs.” 14 They
thought that Reform had carried its program of change much too far
and believed that what American Jewry needed was a more conserva-
tive approach, a return to tradition. As a result, all of their cultural
projects, although formally undertaken in the spirit of Jewish consen-
sus and often with notable Reform Jews participating, nevertheless
waved with them an undertone (and sometimes more) of anti-Reform
animus. This comes through most clearly, of course, in the anti-Re-
form polemic of Moses Dropsie, entitled On Reform in Judaism (1895),
but it may also be seen in the personal correspondence of people like Mayer Sulzberger and Cyrus Adler. It was pronounced
within the portals of the Jewish Theological Seminary and only thinly
veiled at Dropsie College. It was even discernible in the outwardly
more pluralistic world of the Jewish Publication Society. Indeed, on
at least one occasion, Cyrus Adler and Solomon Schechter actively
conspired to keep the Reform Movement down, rigging the board of
the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics to ensure that the “Reform
element” would not have a “preponderating vote.” 15

The other cultural characteristic mentioned above, Philadelphia
Jewry’s pronounced anticlericalism, may come as somewhat more of
a surprise, particularly given Jerold Auerbach’s recent claim that until
late in the nineteenth century, “the voice of American Judaism was
the voice of its rabbis.” 16 Nevertheless, it seems to me that, in contra-
distinction to Cincinnati, the key individuals behind Jewish culture
developments in Philadelphia were, with a few exceptions, well-educated lay leaders, not rabbis. 17 Indeed, at the founding of the Jewish
Publication Society in 1888, and four years later when the American
Jewish Historical Society was founded in New York, rabbis were
initially excluded from leadership roles. 18 Rabbi Marcus Jastrow of
Philadelphia, one of those excluded, discerned what he thought to be
an almost “instinctive” American Jewish fear of “clerical rule.” 19
Moreover, local rabbis were forever being faulted by lay leaders, pub-
licly and privately, for their alleged foreignness, ignorance, pompos-
ity, and most of all for their inability to work together for the sake of
the Jewish community. 20 Whereas in Cincinnati, rabbis like Isaac
Mayer Wise, Max Lilienthal, and later David Philipson were the sym-
ble leaders of the Jewish community, in Philadelphia, according to
Aaron Friedenwald writing in 1888, “there seemed to be but one
opinion prevailing about the rabbis and it was not a very flattering
one.” 21 Not surprisingly, then, Dropsie College, chartered in 1907,
was nonprofessional and nonsectarian; it was a school for training
Jewish scholars rather than rabbis. This reflected the Philadelphia
view that learned laymen and professional scholars, rather than rab-
bis, should stand at the center of Jewish communal and cultural life.

Admittedly, there are some exceptions to these generalizations, no-
tably Sabato Morais, Joseph Krauskopf, and Henry Berkowitz. But
it is interesting that Morais, minister of Mikveh Israel, eschewed the
title rabbi and consciously set himself apart from his colleagues; his
first love was known to be scholarship. 22 As for Krauskopf and Ber-
kowitz, Reform rabbis and also brothers-in-law, they stood outside of
the mainstream and both ended up creating their own organizations,
the Farm School and Chautauqua, where they could be insiders, and
more highly respected. 23

The Jewish leaders of the “Philadelphia Group,” in concert with
others, helped to shape the cultural standards of twentieth-century
American Jews. Through the institutions they created, particularly the Jewish Publication Society, they functioned as cultural gatekeepers, requiring that works of culture conform to certain unwritten guidelines in order to receive approval. Four of these guidelines proved particularly significant and shed light on American Jewish cultural life as a whole.

First and foremost, these leaders believed that works of Jewish culture should be broadly educational. Heirs to nineteenth-century liberal Jewish thought, to the educational ideas of European Jewish scholarship, and to Victorian didacticism, they extolled education, form to the highest standards of dignity and propriety. Culture, they fore sought, through cultural activities, to combat cure for everything from liberal Jewish thought, to the educational keepers, requiring that works of culture conform within proved here somewhat akin to the German bildung, as a kind of panacea, a cure for everything from anti-Semitism to assimilation. They therefore sought, through cultural activities, to combat "ignorance from within and prejudice from without." The idea that culture should be provocative or subversive would have been utterly foreign to their minds.

Second, they attempted, through works of culture, to promote a sense of Jewish unity. However much they argued among themselves over religious and other issues, they nevertheless championed the idea of a unified Jewish cultural tradition, rooted in history, ideas, values, and sacred texts, that linked American Jews one to another, as well as backward through time. This article of faith—the belief that a shared cultural tradition underlay American Jewish life—reflected a noble ideal that still inspires American Jews today. But the cost was high, for it necessarily entailed a stifling of dissent and a willful disregard for the day-to-day reality of Jewish divisiveness.

Third, they insisted that all works of American Jewish culture conform to the highest standards of dignity and propriety. Culture, they thought, needed to be pure and elevating; it should demonstrate how refined Jews had become, and thus project a positive Jewish image to the world. The American Hebrew, for example, refused any illustrations that were "in the least degree indeclicate," and banned any social advertisements, cards of matrimonial brokers and, in the early years, even jokes. The Jewish Publication Society held to equally strict standards and periodically asked authors to rewrite (or "wash") their works in order to make them acceptable for publication. Again, the underlying sense here was that culture should reflect high-minded ideals rather than sordid reality. The result, unsurprisingly, was that Jewish culture often seemed woefully out of touch with the times.

Fourth, and last, promoters of American Jewish culture demanded that everything they supported be fervently patriotic, particularly in wartime. This evident and sometimes exaggerated emphasis on America is easy to understand. American Jews, like Jews in other Western countries and like many other American immigrant groups, felt compelled to go to great lengths to prove their loyalty and patriotism, particularly when these were so frequently being called into question by nativists and anti-Semites alike. American Jews also had the additional problem of having to earn the respect of their European cousins who viewed them as cultural barbarians. The perennial emphasis on America and its virtues thus made sense on two grounds: It evidenced allegiance, and it publicized American Jewish achievements. But if culture played an important apologetic function by promoting loyalty and helping to beat down negative stereotypes, it did so at a price. American Jewish culture was, as a result, more sterile and conformist than might otherwise have been the case.

This, then, is the mixed legacy of the Philadelphia Group: it simultaneously promoted American Jewish culture and restrained it from developing freely. On balance, it seems to me that the positive cultural achievements that were attained largely outweigh the negatives. Certainly, American Jewish cultural life as we know it—the great cultural institutions of Philadelphia and New York, the remarkable libraries, the hundreds of thousands of Jewishly learned books and periodicals, and at least two generations of American Jewish scholars—all owe an incalculable debt to the young visionary Jews of a century past who, whatever their shortcomings, took it upon themselves to revitalize Jewish culture in America and, after a lifetime of effort, succeeded.

Notes


17. A surprising number of them were also lifelong bachelors, including Moses Dropsie, Samuel Elkin, Simon Gratz, Isaac Leeser, Simon Muhr, and Mayer Sulzberger. Charles Rosenberg notes that male celibacy was a Victorian ideal, see his No Other Gods (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 71–88.


